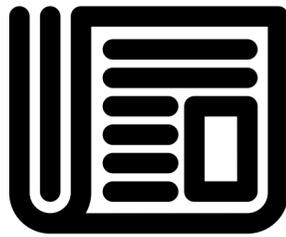


E | byline

3 Ways News
Publishing is
Changing

6 Actions to
Take Now

As news sources fragment and outside contributors increase, traditional newsrooms are straining under the burden of managing, measuring and mixing diverse content sources. The virtual newsroom, an emerging model, relieves the pressure of administrative and support tasks to let news staff focus on their core strengths.



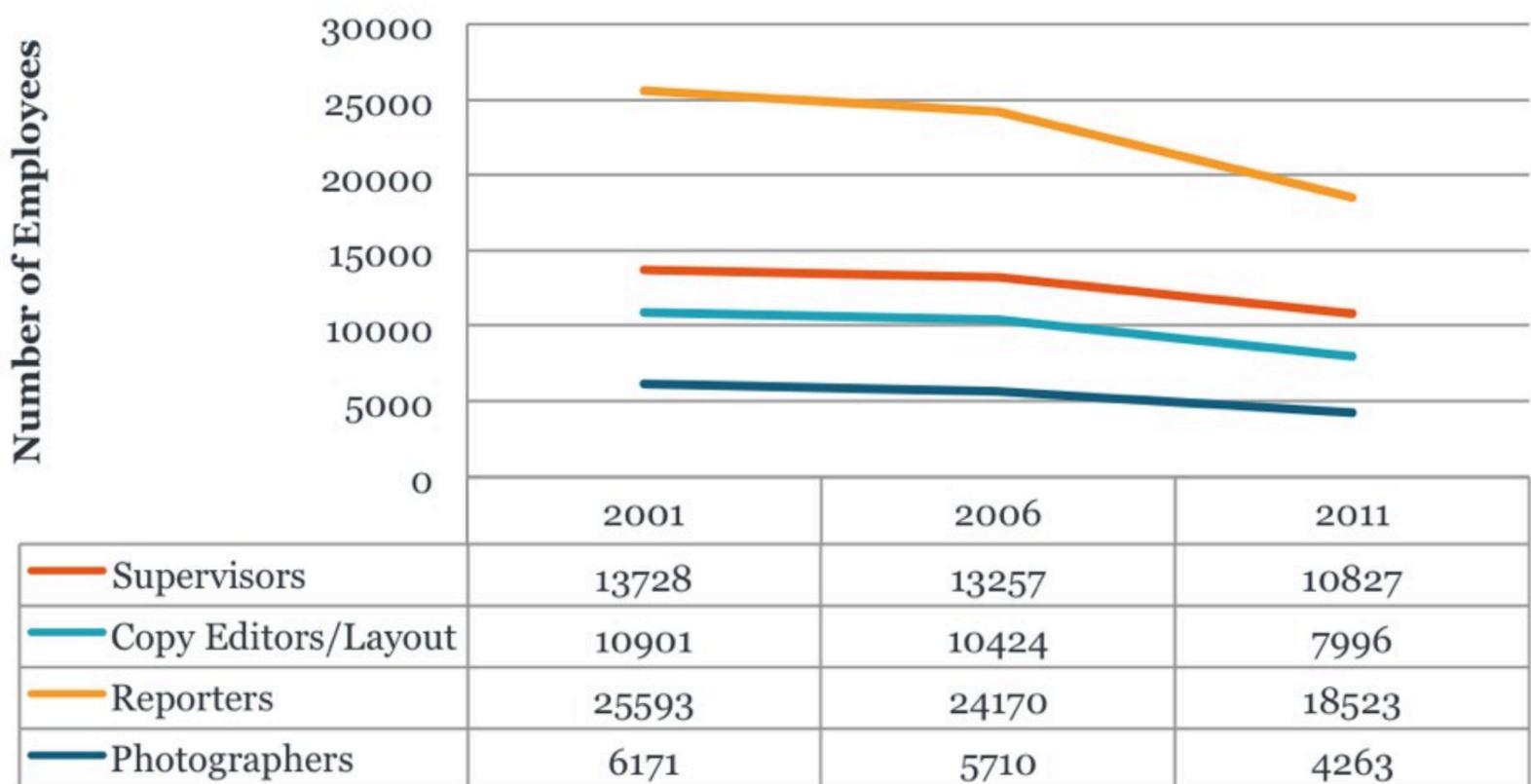
Suddenly, News Is Everybody's Business

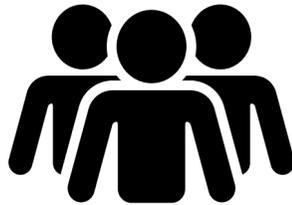
Americans are consuming more news and current content than ever before. On tablets, smart phones, television, radio and paper, we are inundated by headlines, articles, infographics, videos, and commentary from friends and experts — and most consider everything in this torrent to be ‘news.’

Change #1: Dwindling Newsroom Staff

How can there be so much news when the number of staff journalists is decreasing? From 2007 to 2010, employment in traditional newspaper journalism jobs — staff editors, reporters, photographers and the like — dropped by 26%; employment by periodicals slid 16%, and by radio and television stations, 11%, as related by [Mike Mandel, Chief Economic Strategist at the Progressive Policy Institute](#), at his blog “[Mandel on Innovation and Growth](#).”¹

Newsroom Employment 2001-2011





If the dwindling number of staff journalists doesn't explain the simultaneous growth of content, what does? A proliferation of titles and news outlets are driving what Mandel calls "journalistic occupations" that produce content not only for traditional news outlets but also for organizations, corporations, and new models of digital news channels. In fact, Mandel calculates that the rise in 'journalistic jobs' more than offset the erosion of traditional 'journalism jobs,' resulting in a net growth of 5% for all types of journalism positions. Self-employment — including freelance producers of all sorts of content — has become so prevalent that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics started tracking this category, counting **9.6 million freelancers** in early 2012.² In addition, the BLS estimates that **70% of writers** are self-employed.³

More people are producing more content for more news and content outlets than ever before. But at the same time, there are fewer staff journalism editors to manage all that content into a coherent workflow — **two percent fewer, according to Mandel.**⁴

Current newsroom processes can't handle the increased need for multiple content types: traditional news reporting, hyper-local community coverage, online multimedia, and curated reader participation. As staff journalists and editors become a scarce resource, newsroom managers increasingly view them as news specialists and are looking elsewhere to expand content coverage.

Action: The Return of the Local Freelancer

It used to be common for neighbors to see each others' bylines in the local paper. Local freelancers used to be integrated into local coverage. Now, that old tradition is re-emerging as a key strategy for some news organizations as they seek to provide polished specialty content from accomplished local freelancers.

"Freelancers are a major part of our strategy to maintain the level of local content that our readers expect, even though under the hood, the resources we have to source that content are much less than they were before," says Mizell Stewart III, Vice President of Content for the newspaper division of The E.W. Scripps Company. "We have found it economical to identify certain types of content for which freelance journalists can deliver quality equal to members of our staff."

Aimee Blume, a local culinary instructor, is now the featured food contributor to Scripps' Courier & Press in Evansville, Ind. She integrates local customs and seasonal produce into her stories, recipes and how-to articles. With a bit of coaching

to develop her writing and photography skills, Blume quickly grew into the role — and her qualifications injected a new level of authority to Courier & Press food coverage. Similar practices are advancing in most of Scripps' 13 other newsrooms.

The more local freelancers a publisher relies on, the more complex the workflow for editors. Scripps, which has provided venture capital for Ebyline, was an early adopter of the virtual newsroom enabling the company to cut editors' administrative chores from 10 hours a month to 30 minutes.

The status quo isn't pretty. Most editors rely on a patchwork of folders and spreadsheets to track which projects are due, from whom, and who has been paid. With Ebyline, dealing with freelancers is seamless, from sourcing to payment. "Utilizing Ebyline is a way to source quality content and streamline managing it," Mizell says. "The hardest part is moving existing freelancers from the manual system to Ebyline. Once we got past that point, we don't know what we did without it."

Editors are the fulcrum for content creation and flow. They make assignments and vet the completed work. Editors decide when content is ready to enter production via the CMS. Staff-generated work is typically created in individual workspaces — within the CMS or within a word processing system, then imported into the CMS funnel. But there is no typical funnel for managing the inflow of externally generated content. To stay organized, editors have had to toggle among a patchwork of tools.

Recently, the concept of a streamlined system for handling externally generated content from start to finish began to coalesce. It started with the idea that there could be one system that automated freelancer workflow, payments, invoices, agreements and metrics. The virtual newsroom steadily evolved to incorporate the entire workflow, from creative collaboration among editors and

contributors to generating year-end tax statements. Two newspaper industry managers, Bill Momary and Allen Narcisse, conceived the virtual newsroom as an online space where editors and external contributors — freelancers — could collaborate. And because business operations are drains on the time and efficiency of both editors and freelancers, they designed Ebyline with automated business functions, too. As the virtual newsroom wins converts, Ebyline is catalyzing new approaches to editorial content management. The virtual newsroom is re-defining editorial productivity and how freelancers are effectively managed.

“What is broken is not content. It’s the economic model around content production,” says Momary. The goal of the virtual newsroom, he says, is to “sustain quality journalism” by streamlining the infrastructure that supports content creation and contributor-editor collaboration.

Change #2: Proliferating Channels, Exponential Demand for Content

The search economy pivots on the magnetic pull of the right words reaching the right customers at the right time. When a compelling concept bubbles up in the public consciousness, the words associated with that content turn into traffic, and that traffic turns into revenue. The search economy spins words into currency.

While news organizations realign their business models to the search economy, they also must compete with newly minted content publishers. From corporations that want to attract customers for packaged goods to nonprofits that seek to build armies of advocates, all digital publishers rely on a steady stream of fresh, relevant content to draw and build their audiences. Without the right words, they will not be found. And if they are not found, awareness will drop and sales will follow.

The search economy forces every organization into the publishing business. Suddenly, sourcing, editing and publishing content is a core marketing competency. The **Custom Content Council** reports that 29% of overall marketing, advertising and communications budgets are dedicated to content marketing and that 66% of the organizations it surveyed in 2011 expect that custom content will claim a larger proportion of marketing budgets in

the next several years.⁵ Marketers are already in a digital-first publishing mode: the average company distributes content 403.8 times a year and 79% of the companies surveyed by the **Custom Content Council** update articles, blog posts and other digital content every day.

Local content is emerging as one of the most promising arenas for winning new digital advertisers. Locally generated content supports search engine optimization when it is unique to the publication, relevant to readers and compelling for advertisers.

Traditional news outlets and new digital publishers face the same challenges in acquiring and producing content: how to ramp up their capacity to manage content flow that directly drives search and business results. The industry must migrate to a structure that supports better synchronization of content with the evolving digital business model. As one publisher was quoted in the 2012 Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism report, “The Search for a New Business Model:” “The newspaper industry cannot sustain its existing cost structure now. It’s a fact of life. It is going to have to get leaner than what it is.”⁶

Change #3: Antiquated Work Processes Are Barriers to Efficiency



The pressing concerns of editors, according to **2011 and 2010 surveys by the Project for Excellence in Journalism**⁷ include:

- Maintaining quality writing and editing despite staff and budget cuts (this was also the top concern of digital editors).
- Redefining roles, strategies and tactics for moving newsrooms from once-a-day to a 24/7 operation.
- Managing an increased content flow across multiple publishing channels.

The **Pew Research Center** predicts that use of freelancers will increase; that is already the case at

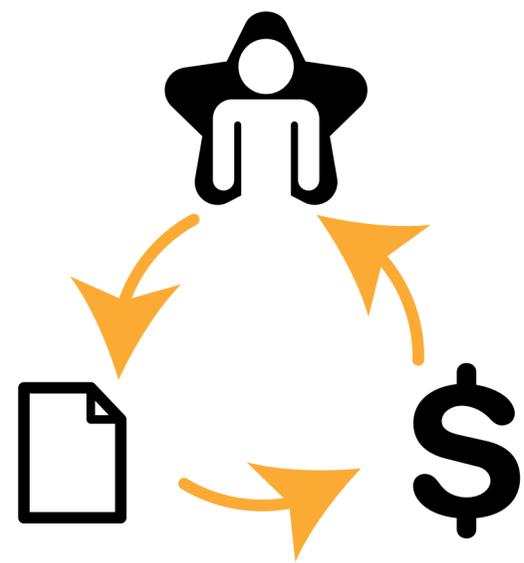
broadcast operations, they found.⁸ Transitioning from ‘print first’ to ‘digital first’ is more than a shift from one publishing platform to another. It requires a fresh approach to news and content from conception to publication.

Traditionally, editors have relied on a patchwork of schedules, calendars, budgets and reminders to keep track of all the stories in the pipelines they manage. Enterprise content management systems enable editors to track stories underway by staff contributors. But corralling content in the freelance pipeline has become exponentially more difficult.

Reports from editors list the tools they juggle to try to keep track of what is coming in from whom, when. **The Bangor Daily News** for instance, relies on Google docs and Wordpress for content management for its digital editions.⁹

To manage external contributions, editors most commonly use¹⁰:

- Spreadsheets
- Calendars
- Shared documents in the cloud
- Campfire and similar collaborative workspaces in the cloud
- Email folders
- Word folders
- Plugins to open-source software such as Wordpress
- Jury-rigged solutions in the enterprise CMS
- Internal email, interoffice mail and the occasional hand-delivery to coordinate payment with the finance department



None of these tools coordinate with each other. Editors must toggle among several tools to simply see the status of a single story, the conversation she has been having with the contributor, and the story itself. Such systems are unsustainable. They cannot scale to accommodate the growing flow of content and contributor relationships. And if the mode of managing external contributions doesn’t adapt, editors will not be able to achieve the level of

content quality required to drive growth in the search economy.

Every editor knows that content is only as good as the content producer. That is the upside of the flood of external contributions: more talent, more expertise, a broader network, and the potential to find the right contributor for the right story at the right time.

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However, managing relationships — from creative collaboration to the business necessities — is also a logistical challenge for editors.

Experienced editors know that successful collaborations pivot on two factors: clear expectations and **clearly defined accountability**.¹¹ A clear understanding of who is doing what, when and how they are doing it, and when the work will be delivered is the essential element of a productive working relationship.

At the same time, the fluid process of content production requires ongoing collaboration, communication, and course correction. What an editor or contributor originally saw is not necessarily what she wants to get, or deliver, as reporting unfolds. Faulty, fragmented communication makes creative collaboration difficult at best, and undermines the quality of the content, frustrating both the editor and the contributor in the process. This process wastes time, introduces errors and misunderstandings, and squanders scarce editorial attention.

Action: Re-engineer Collaboration

By pulling together the planning, collaborative, and business functions of editing into a dashboard, the virtual newsroom enables editors to keep external contributions on point, on time, and on budget. The virtual newsroom advances editors' goals of moving to a 24/7, digital-first operation and supports the business objectives of aligning content-driven revenue in the search economy.

When editors and freelancers can track story status, refer to assignments, share notes, and reference style guides, they can spend their effort on the creative process, not on searching folders and spreadsheets for status reports. As well, by automating business functions such as invoicing and contracts, editors are freed from time-consuming administrative chores — without relying on administrative staff vulnerable to layoff. Finally, the network of freelancers within easy reach through the virtual newsroom simplifies the process of finding the right contributor for the right story.

Editors can achieve the digital-first goals that support growth in the search economy. “Ebyline is a platform that lets you manage your virtual staff,” says Ebyline CEO Momary.

“These editors are in search of work processes and organizational structures that will take them past the sense of lurching triage as they “get the paper out” — as well as the Web, social media and digital tablet content. There is a strong sense that if they could nail down the processes and systems, they could do much better journalism — regardless of the resource levels or the platforms. Almost 80 percent said it was “important/very important” to “redesign work processes and organizational structure to improve productivity and align with new staffing and resource realities” — **ASNE/ API 2011 Industry Challenges and Opportunities**¹²

The virtual newsroom enables editors to manage:

- Time
- Quality
- Creative energy
- Attention
- Content flow and coordination
- Financial budgets
- Compensation
- Invoicing and contracts
- Relationships
- Contributor recruiting

Action: Grow Special Projects

When the Los Angeles Times lands huge custom content projects, it's a win. Managing the 200 freelancers who produce the copy, photos and digital content for those projects? Not so much.

Handled separately from the newsroom, such projects require editors to locate qualified freelancers for an array of content, from social media posts to fashion photographers for on-site shoots, explains Andy Vogel, SVP Digital/Mobile for Tribune Digital. Every project demands a different mix of contributors, triggering a fresh cascade of paperwork that flows through the editorial process.

Synchronizing everything through Ebyline has freed up time and energy for editing, collaborating and production. "We found a huge savings," says Vogel. "Among five editors, 25% to 30% of their time — all their time — was set free. And our

finance office saved another 10% in back-end processing time. The nominal fee that we pay to Ebyline more than pays for itself just with the savings from the finance office."

The business case was compelling. Editors, though, were more interested in how Ebyline introduced them to qualified freelancers in far-flung locations. And, editors realized that they had underestimated how much repetition and inefficiency was inherent in the traditional mode of managing freelancer-related paperwork.

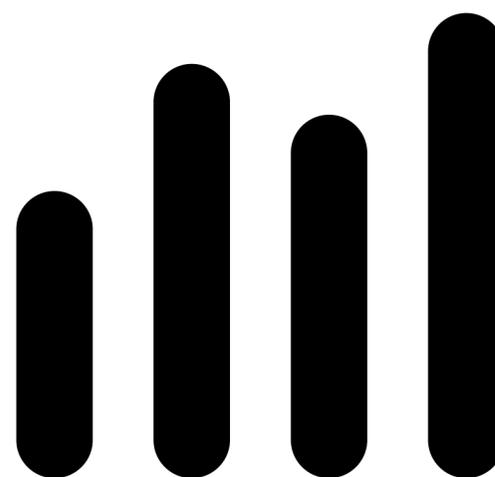
The virtual newsroom holds the potential to realign the economics of newsroom operations to the degree that it could even preserve staff jobs, Vogel believes. "If you cut cost out of the system, you have the chance to assign reporters to longer term investigative stories. That's our core competency. Why wouldn't you do this?"

Action: Use New Tools for Content Management

The search economy is awash in measurement and analysis, of published content. But until the advent of the virtual newsroom, editors and managers have not had tools to track the effectiveness of individual content contributors, especially external contributors, who might contribute infrequently.

With the rudimentary tools they've been forced to use thus far, editors have only been able to make informed guesses as to which freelancers turn in accurate work on time. Editors have also been operating without metrics on pay rates and which work drives results in the search economy. The metrics generated through daily use of the virtual newsroom equip editors with quantitative metrics that enable them to identify the most cost-effective contributors and topics. To date, editors have had to rely on anecdotal recall as they plan editorial calendars. But with metrics from the virtual newsroom dashboard, they can see which contributors are the right match for which new assignments, and plan deadlines accordingly.

These metrics enable editors to assign and publish truly original content — the category most highly valued by the search economy, says Momary. "It's creating search instead of just reacting to search," he says.



A large white letter 'C' on a teal background.

Action: Develop and Retain Quality Contributors

Freelancers, too, can fine-tune their client relationships based on the metrics produced by their own dashboards, determining which clients and which assignments are most profitable. This is especially valuable for part-time freelancers, who don't have enough experience to put current working relationships in context. Demand for freelance work has always been erratic; while some news organizations have trimmed freelance budgets, others expect to rely even more on freelancers. For instance, about 24% of the **business editors surveyed in mid-2011 for the Donald W.**

Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism predicted that the volume of freelance assignments would rise in the foreseeable future; another 64% predicted that it would remain stable.¹³

And, more Americans are expected to give freelancing a go, as a full-time job in lieu of a corporate job; for supplemental income; or as a retirement job. **As many as 35% of Americans might be self-employed, contractors or freelancers by 2023, according to some staffing consultants.**¹⁴

Action Plan: Emerging Best Practices in Freelance Content Management

- Rely on local subject matter experts as regular contributors.
- Integrate digital elements into freelance assignments, clarifying expectations.
- Free up staff time by automating freelance-related payment and administrative chores.
- Cultivate two types of freelance pools: reliable local freelancers for frequent contributions and a far-flung network for as-needed contributions.
- Set up and maintain a central database of reliable freelancers for all desks — news, features, photo, and graphics — to use.
- Adopt a single, organization-wide system for the freelance workflow and train editors in how to make the most of it.



Conclusion

The virtual newsroom enables publishers to capture efficiencies while aligning their business models with new economic realities. Expanded content flow and an ever-widening range of publishing channels demand a tool that manages content and collaboration with external contributors. With the virtual newsroom, scarce staff effort can be concentrated on work that is core to the publication's mission while editors smoothly manage the daily flow of articles and digital content that readers expect...all while maintaining editorial standards of quality journalism.

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End Notes

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